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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 ABUJA 001327

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR G/TIP, INL, DRL AND AF/RA

DOL FOR ILAB

E.O. 19358: N/A

TAGS: PHUM KCRM KWMN NI IT

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: A LOOK AT THE EDO STATE TIP PROBLEM

Sensitive but Unclassified -- Protect Accordingly.

1.(SBU) Summary: A visit to Edo State, the core of the trafficking-in-persons (TIP) problem in Nigeria, revealed the dimensions of the steep challenge facing law enforcement agencies and social service providers. Criminality is widespread in Edo and much of the economy is fueled by remittances and other money generated by commercial sex trafficking. Attempting to make a dent in this problem are a few local NGOs, including one started by the State Governor's wife. Post will submit separately (to USAID/WID) a proposal for prevention and protection projects in the state. End Summary.

2.(U) RNLEO, USAID's Democracy and Governance Officer, and INL FSN visited Benin City, Edo State, April 18-19 for discussions with state government officials and local NGOs about the commercial sex trafficking problem from this state to Europe. This trip coincided with the visit to Lagos and Edo State of Italian police, immigration and Ministry of Justice officials from Turin and the head of Italy's anti-trafficking NGO "TAMPEP."

Recent History

3.(U) Edo State emerged as the source of African prostitutes in Italy in the mid- to late-1980's. Thousands of young girls and women from Edo State now walk the streets and work the brothels of cities like Turin, Milan and Genoa. Edo residents are unable to explain fully the genesis of this phenomenon, but the trafficking linkage to Italy is now firm and pronounced. The Nigerian government (GON) estimates that 17,000 Nigerian girls, most from Edo State, work in Italy under coercive circumstances as prostitutes.

4.(U) In late 2001, the Italian government negotiated a repatriation agreement with the GON, allowing for the efficient repatriation of large numbers of Nigerian women and girls (and a few men) found in Italy without valid immigration documents. Most of these girls and women are from Edo State. The agreement has dramatically increased the number of charter flights returning the trafficking victims to Nigeria. Since the beginning of the year, almost 400 TIP victims have been flown back to Nigeria, compared with a total of about 500 repatriated in all of 2001.

5.(U) According to the Italian officials visiting Benin City, the Italian government also adopted a TIP law in 1998 allowing for trafficking victims to remain in Italy and eventually obtain citizenship if they "denounce" their traffickers or brothel operators, i.e. cooperate with police in investigating and prosecuting the syndicates behind the trade in women for sex.

Edo's Criminal Economy

6.(SBU) State officials and NGO workers assert the trafficking business is king in Edo State. When asked to what extent the trafficking business affects the state's GDP, one official scoffed, "It IS the state's GDP!" Many claim there is hardly a family in Benin

City without a relative who is or has been involved in the sex trade in Italy. According to one contact, the Western Union office in Benin City is flooded daily with transfers of hard currency remittances from Italy. (Comment: This tracks with detailed information recently shown to RNLEO by the Italian ambassador to Nigeria depicting huge money flows from Italy to banks and Western Union in Benin City. End Comment.)

7.(SBU) No one can adequately explain the Edo trafficking phenomenon; why and how one state of Nigeria has become the dominant source of sex trafficking from Nigeria to Italy and other countries in Europe is not completely understood. Nevertheless, this trend has become self-sustaining as former trafficking victims recruit others to take their place or their perceived success in earning hard currency, coupled with economic deprivation at home, drives others to follow. Mrs. Iki Igbiniedion, the Governor's wife, claims the indigenous Bini culture has been corrupted; the export of sex workers is not only tolerated but flaunted in some instances. Too many parents are proud to display the items purchased with the remittances earned by daughters in bonded sexual work in Europe. Some husbands even send their wives to work in the brothels of Europe in order to increase the household income. This stands in contrast with traditional Bini values that abhor prostitution, she asserts.

The Code of Silence -----

8.(SBU) According to the police and local NGOs, traffickers obtain the silence of girls who sign up for what they think will be great economic opportunities through the use of rituals based on local traditional religions. Submitting to these rituals performed by "traditional" priests, the girls takes oaths not to betray their "sponsors" (traffickers) or the brothel operators for whom they will work in Italy. The explicit threat of breaking these oaths is punishment of the parents or relatives of the girls.

9.(SBU) These oaths, coupled with a country-wide mistrust of the police and other government authorities, form the greatest obstacle to fighting the TIP trade effectively. Despite the new offer of immigration amnesty to TIP victims who denounce their traffickers and madams, Italian police find few Nigerian girls and women willing to testify against these criminals. Similarly, police in Nigeria interviewing returned victims find little success in building criminal cases, though corruption and a lack of commitment also are factors in the lack of law enforcement efforts against the well-entrenched trade.

10.(SBU) NGOs also face this obstacle. According to NGO workers in Benin City, few returned victims are willing to speak out about their ordeals or provide valuable first-hand testimony to awareness campaigns. Convincing impoverished girls and their families that the stories about easy money in Europe are false has been very difficult. As a means to stop this illicit trade, NGOs have launched campaigns using several methods, including scare tactics, highlighting the dangers of HIV/AIDS, violence of brothel operators and clients, and the risk of being arrested and deported without having earned any real money.

11.(SBU) Most disheartening, note local observers, is the desire of many returned victims to trek back to Europe to resume their work as sex workers. Some believe this is a result of the promises made to families to earn good money, the oaths taken during traditional religious rituals, and ultimately the desire to "succeed" as they perceive many before them having done. The lack of economic opportunities in Edo State is another "push" factor that adds to the perception that commercial sex work is one of the limited available options for making money. Anti-TIP efforts by local NGOs and the Governor's wife have been met by loud local opposition. Many see these efforts as threatening the economic prosperity of families in the community.

Shelter Lacking

12.(SBU) Local contacts highlighted the problem of coping with increasing numbers of trafficking victims repatriated from Italy. Most girls arrive in Lagos, are screened quickly by Police or Immigration, and released soon thereafter because of the extremely limited shelter space at Police and Immigration compounds in Lagos. The Governor's wife was recently asked by Police in Lagos to receive and care for 150 repatriated TIP victims from Edo state but she could not provide them with accommodations so they, like others arriving en masse, were released. Many end making the trip back to Italy or other destinations in Europe.

13.(SBU) A visit to the Skills Acquisition Center of Idia Renaissance found a well-equipped complex capable of training up to 250 girls in four skill groups -- computers, fashion design, hair styling, and home economics. This vocational training center set up by the Governor's wife offers girls six months of free training and targets both returned trafficking victims and girls-at-risk. The center, however, does not have accommodations for overnight lodging of trafficking victims. Two buildings recently donated to Idia Renaissance are ideal for conversion to hostels for trafficking survivors and capable of housing comfortably 60 girls. Mrs. Igbiniedion will provide Post with a proposal for assistance in refurbishing these buildings. Aside from immediate shelter needs, Embassy officers noted a lack of adequate counseling for returned trafficking victims.

Trafficking or Illegal Immigration?

14.(SBU) Most local contacts estimate that 70 percent of the girls and women trafficked from Edo State are aware they will be working as prostitutes in Europe and give their consent. This characterization tracks with Embassy Officers' many conversations with police and TIP victims. This apparent initial consent of the majority of girls leaving Nigeria for European brothels leads some to classify this trade as simple illegal migration and the girls and women involved as co-conspirators in this crime. Weighing the coercive and the consensual aspects of this large-scale movement of females from Nigeria is more complicated than assessing the sex trafficking that occurs in other parts of the world (where the lack of consent is clear-cut). The trade from Nigeria is engineered by organized crime and does indeed involve a degree of violence and coercion in both Nigeria and Europe.

15.(SBU) Discussion with the Turin officials reinforced the trafficking aspect of this migration. They describe the violent and coercive circumstance under which the trafficked girls work in Italy. Their travel documents -- even if forged -- are taken away, as well as their most basic freedoms. NGOs have also documented the use of force in transporting the girls along the routes from Nigeria to Europe, oftentimes with forged documents via neighboring ECOWAS countries. While traffickers could once use direct flights from Lagos to Europe, more vigilant immigration screening has preempted these air routes and traffickers are forced to smuggle their human cargo through West and Central Africa, across the Sahara Desert, and finally across the Mediterranean Sea.

Police vs. Immigration

16.(SBU) Mission Officers were surprised to learn that both the Nigerian Immigration Service and the state Police Command have set up anti-trafficking units in Edo State. The immigration unit has been operational for two months but the police unit was only established in April. Both are benefiting from equipment donated by the Italian government for anti-trafficking purposes. Neither unit, however, confirmed the level of cooperation that will be needed to tackle the state's trafficking problem.

17.(SBU) During a frank discussion with Mrs. Igbiniedion and her NGO's staff, one worker stated that

corrupt Immigration officials have been known to facilitate trafficking, though Immigration officials present claimed they are now screening young female passport applicants to see if they have valid justification to travel to Europe. One local Immigration anti-TIP official, however, showed his true colors when, after the visit to the Idia Renaissance vocational training center, he solicited money from EMBOFFs to buy beer.

Italians Take Hits

18.(SBU) A formal April 18 meeting of the US and Italian visitors with the Governor's wife and the committee of local leaders steering her anti-TIP NGO became lively as some Nigerian participants attempted to pin responsibility for the trafficking problem on the Italian demand for African prostitutes. This criticism was particularly motivated by a statement from one of the Italian visitors that prostitution in Italy is tolerated and customers are seldom arrested or prosecuted, though prostitution is technically illegal. A related complaint was the perceived consequences of deporting girls to the shame awaiting them in Nigeria (for having failed to earn money for their families) after having been subjected to extreme hardships in Italy. The head of Italian NGO "TANPEP" responded by highlighting the immigration amnesty available to TIP victims willing to cooperate in police investigations and the "Turnaround" project of her NGO in sheltering, training and rehabilitating Nigerian trafficking victims in Italy.

Law Enforcement Cooperation Needed

19.(SBU) Seeking to balance the Nigerian-Italian debate (that Mission officers observed as bystanders) one of the Turin police investigators noted the lack of law enforcement cooperation between Italy and Nigeria. He stated that Italian efforts to investigate trafficking crimes in Turin frequently produce details on traffickers in Lagos and Edo State but Italian authorities are powerless to act on this information. He called for a channel of communication to pass actionable information on these trafficking crimes.

20.(SBU) In a side meeting, the Italian police officials stated they only have been able to exchange business cards with relevant Nigerian police and immigration officials, but still hoped to open up an effective channel to exchange criminal evidence on trafficking. One Italian police investigator expressed concern over the Nigerian perception that Italian police do not arrest or prosecute traffickers in Italy but only focus on arresting and deporting Nigerian commercial sex workers. He claimed that he and his colleagues arrest, on average, one Nigerian trafficker or brothel operator a week. This action is perhaps not recognized in Nigeria because the arrested Nigerian traffickers often have legitimate Italian residency or citizenship and therefore are not deported, but incarcerated in Italy. RNLEO suggested that the Italian government, through its diplomatic mission in Nigeria, publicize these enforcement actions in Nigeria.

Comment

21.(SBU) Edo state is the center of a lucrative and well-entrenched criminal trade that probably has the support of many local officials and local law enforcement officers. This is underscored by the fact that a former Police commissioner of the state was arrested in Conakry last year and extradited to stand trial in Lagos for trafficking. Making progress against this criminal trade in Edo State will require a much stronger, multi-faceted strategy: greater public outreach efforts, more resources to care for and rehabilitate trafficking victims, and much stronger law enforcement operations against the trafficking syndicates.

22.(SBU) The upsurge in Italian repatriations of Nigerian TIP victims has highlighted the immediate need for short- and long-term shelters for these girls

and women. While many Edo State observers call for Italy to cease or reduce the level of deportations, the immediate establishment of care facilities in Edo State to provide housing for the returnees while they are trained in marketable vocations is a dire need. There is also a need to set up HIV/AIDS screening facilities for repatriated girls/women. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) at TANPEP's "Turnaround Project" have expressed interest in carrying out coordinated repatriation and care activities in Italy and Nigeria. Post's TIP committee will submit separately a funding proposal addressing Edo State's acute shelter and vocational training needs for TIP victims.

23.(SBU) The increased deportations of TIP victims are clearly not popular in Edo State, but ultimately they may serve as a deterrent to future trafficking of prospective victims. It also hits the traffickers where it hurts -- cutting into their initial investments in smuggling these girls to Europe. But to be effective, this strategy of increased deportations must be matched by increased joint Italian-Nigerian prosecution of traffickers and better care for the victims returned to Nigeria.

JETER